DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 615 CS 208 192

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TITLE Controlling the Writing Process: Not a Monolithic Process.
PUB DATE May 83
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Council of Teachers of English (16th, Montreal, Canada, May 10-14, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cognitive Processes; *Coherence; *Cohesion (Written Composition); College Freshmen; Higher Education; Influences; *Locus of Control; *Writing Processes; *Writing Research

ABSTRACT

In order to evaluate writer control of global coherence under various contexts, writer texts produced by 13 college freshmen enrolled in a basic skills section of a composition course were collected as a natural part of the ongoing instruction. The texts examined were written on five different topics: misuse of power, a personal experience of the writer, schooling, a writer-selected topic, and discrimination. Each assignment required different types of cognitive, linguistic, and textual manipulations on the part of the students; demanded the use of different background knowledge; and were produced under various time constraints. The written texts were then given to three readers and ranked in terms of their overall or global coherence. Results showed that as ranking conditions varied for the students, so did their ability to control global coherence. For almost all writers, rank within one writing condition was not predictive of rank within another. Furthermore, different writers were affected differently by different tasks and sensitive to different aspects of each writing condition. Just as a writer's control of coherence within one writing condition was not predictive of control within another, overall writer control of coherence was not always predictive of control from one task to another. These results suggest that growth in writing is a process that involves the writer's ability to use and control strategies within an ever widening range of contexts. (HOD)

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Controlling the Writing Process: Not a Monolithic Process

Introduction

Writing has been commonly perceived as a process which one either does or does not control. We talk of proficient vs. nonproficient writers, of traditional vs. basic writers, or simply of writers who are good or poor. This conceptualization of text production is based on the critical assumption that writing involves a global and monolithic ability. It is perceived as a skill which once learned can be universally applied and controlled under a variety of contexts and situations. Ignored, however, is the multi-dimensional nature of the process and the contextual dependency of literacy. It is this contextual dependency of literacy which is to be examined, both theoretically and empirically, within this paper.

Theoretical Considerations

In this study, writing is characterized as a psycho-sociolinguistic event which is influenced by situational, cognitive, and linguistic factors. The demands of any writing experience will vary depending on the context of situation in which the text is evolved, the background of the writer with the data to be manipulated and expressed, and the writer's facility with the cognitive strategies used to generate meanings in print. A change in any of these factors will affect the writer's ability to control the process, causing changes in both the process and the product of the writing act.

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Given the existence and influence of these variables, the myth of writing as a monolithic process becomes suspect. Writing performance, growth, and development can no longer be naively regarded as a global ability. It does not consist of a set of sub-skills which once learned can be universally applied with equal facility under all writing conditions. Rather, language performance changes as the relevant variables impinging on the process itself change (Beaugrande, 1980; Britton, Burgess, Martin, & Rosen, 1975; Clay, 1975; Halliday, 1974; Halliday & Hasan, 1976, 1980; Perron, 1976; Sowers, 1979). In fact, "for some kinds of writing, the difficulties may actually increase as the writer becomes more proficient (Britton et al, 1975, p. 19), "errors increasing with age because as the child's mind grows, s/he will use more and more complicated forms of expression" (Diebel & Sears, 1917, p. 175).

The variability found in language processing is also a result of the limited resource capacity of the system itself. The writer's attention in text processing is finite and must always be focused on those aspects of the process requiring the most resources. Under certain conditions, particular aspects of processing will require less attention, allowing the "freed" resources of the system to be applied to other areas of text production. Under other conditions, several aspects of the process may demand attention, even those which are normally considered as routine and usually in need of fewer resources. Therefore, as conditions and contexts change, or the internal demands of the writing task vary, the writer may need to focus on processes over which there is less control.

These various writing situations to which a writer may be exposed require that the writer be capable of distributing resources and attention selectively toward relevant aspects of production while disattending others (Beaugrande, 1980). At times this will call for the distribution of resources in patterns

at variance from those found under other writing conditions, the writer juggling and integrating the multiple constraints of knowledge and resources in new or novel ways. Given this variance, the writer may not exhibit control over the process to the same degree as might be the case under other writing situations.

This does not mean, however, that because the supply of resources are limited that they are applied in an all or none manner. Instead, resources are distributed in a manner proportionate to the needs of each activity and its relative importance to the overall functioning of the system. Complicating this process, however, is the fact that different executions require varying amounts of resources at different points and times during text processing. In order to adequately distribute the system's resources and avoid sequential, step-by-step executions, processing must be capable of operating in parallel and be highly transactive in nature, with a number of operations possible of occurring simultaneously. The exact number capable of operating in parallel will depend on such factors as the writer's background, experiences with the process, and the point in text production. Once again, changes in these factors will result in changes in writer control over the process.

Empirical Considerations

While conventional wisdom has begun to acknowledge that context affects performance and that a writer's control of the process is not to be generalized across topics and writing situations, there does not exist substantial amounts of writing data supporting such a theoretical position. The remainder of this paper begins to document such a claim by directly examining writer control of global coherence under a variety of contexts.

Global coherence was selected as the construct for investigation because of the critical role which it plays in all language processing. If discourse is to be effective, it must be organized around a semantic 'core' topic, or

theme. Halliday and Hasan (1980) have called coherence the enabling function since it allows one to organize the meanings being constructed. Beaugrande (1980) has proposed that performance in text processing depends on the extent of organization which the language user can impose on the data being formulated during the writing or reading act. Perhaps more than any other individual, van Dijk (1980) has demonstrated the critical role which global coherence serves in the generation of meaning. For van Dijk, global coherence is represented in a text's macrostructure, that higher-level semantic framework which organizes the 'local' microstructure of the text.

Data Collection and Analysis

The writers involved in the study were thirteen college freshmen enrolled in a basic skills section of an elementary composition course at a large mid-western university. While the writers were placed in the basic skills section due to their apparent lack of control with the process, there existed a wide range of abilities among those taking the course. Many did in fact experience great difficulty controlling aspects of the composing process, however, there also existed as many students who did not fit the definition of "basic skills" as commonly used in the literature and were in fact quite proficient.

Five texts produced by these students throughout the course of the semester were used to evaluate writer control of global coherence under various contexts. The texts were collected as a natural part of the ongoing instruction, the researcher serving as both the instructor of the composition course and as the collector of the data.

The texts examined were on five different topics: misuse of power, a personal experience of the writer, schooling, a writer-selected topic, and discrimination. Each assignment required different types of cognitive, linguistic, and textual manipulations on the part of the students, demanded the use of different background knowledge, and were produced under various

time constraints. While space does not allow for an in-depth discussion of all the differences between the assignments, a short delineation of the key variations will be set forth. Even from such a short delineation as that which is to follow, it will become readily apparent that the five writing assignments were far from identical in nature.

The misuse of power and discrimination writings, the first and last assignments in the course, were used to evaluate overall writer growth and development and were thus the most similar in nature. Each student read an assigned article on the topic and then was instructed to write his or her own text about the dangers of misue of power by a person in some position of high authority and about a kind of prejudice or discrimination which exits in society. Students wrote only one draft which was immediately followed by a final draft. No discussion of the articles which the students read before writing occurred, nor were comments made by the instructor on the rough drafts. Total time spent on each of these two writing topics was seven days.

The assignment on a personal experience required the students to first read three articles written by others on personal experiences and then involved them in three instructional strategies in reading and writing using these articles. This was followed by two prewriting activities and the writing of a rough draft in which students narrated personal experiences which they had encountered. After completing their rough drafts, students were engaged in one revision strategy. Students then revised their texts and wrote final drafts. Twenty-one days were spent on this assignment.

The third topic written on was that of schooling. Students read three expository texts on the schooling process in America and this time experienced five reading and writing activities related to the articles. They were then involved in four pre-writing activities. Following these pre-writing activities, students wrote articles concerning a particular aspect of schooling and were required to integrate information gleaned from the texts

read into their own writings. Two rough drafts were produced, with each followed by a revision activity. Students spent twenty-two days on this writing topic.

Finally, for the self-selected topic, students chose subjects for which they had substantial amounts of background knowledge and in which they were interested. As in the two previous assignments, students were involved in reading and writing activities with their articles, this time one activity per article. Five pre-writing activities preceded the writing of the first rough draft. This was followed by a revision strategy, a second rough draft, a second revision strategy, and a final draft. As in the schooling assignment, students used information from the texts read in their own writings. Sixteen days were spent on this writing assignment.

The thirteen texts from each of the five writing conditions described above were then given to three readers and ranked in terms of their overall or global coherence. Readers were doctoral students and faculty members in English and Reading Education. Rankings were from one to thirteen. The directions for the rankings were as follows:

> Texts vary in the degree to which they cohere around an implicit or explicit central point or idea, i.e. in their conceptual unity. Read the following set of texts and rank order them from one to thirteen in terms of their global coherence, i.e. their general or overall coherence. On the coherence continuum, one should be the most coherent and thirteen the least.

Following the rankings of all texts, an average coherence rank was then generated and assigned to each writer per task. While there was usually one text per task which readers did not agree on in terms of their rankings, for the most part, there was a high degree of consensus among readers.

Results and Discussion

If writing were a process uniformally controlled by writers under a variety of conditions, relative rank should remain constant across tasks. However, this was not found to be the case. As clearly indicated in Figure 1, as writing conditions varied for the students in this study, so too did

writers	MISUSE OF POWER	PERSONAL EXPERIENCE	SCHOOLING	SELF-SELECTED TOPIC	DISCRIMINATION		AVERAGE CLASS RANK	
Ralph	8-9	4	2	8-9	4		3-4	
Jerry	7	11	1	7	9		8	
Christine	1	10	12	11	8		10	
Donald	13	13	11	4	6		11	
Ted	2	6	7	10	2		3-4	
Nadine	4	3	8	6	13		6-7	
Lester	10	8	4-5	13	12		12	least proficient
Evelyn	3	9	3	12	7		6-7	
Rick	11	12	13	8-9	5		13	least proficient
Sherri	12	5	9	2-3	11		9	
Mary	8-9	7	4-5	1	1		1	most proficient
Diane	6	1	10	2-3	3		2	most proficient
Allen	5	2	6	5	10		5	

Figure 1. Average coherence rankings across writing tasks.

their ability to control global coherence. For almost all writers, rank within one writing condition was not predictive of rank within another, i.e. ranks were not constant across contexts. Furthermore, different writers were affected differently by different tasks and sensitive to different aspects of each writing condition.

Throughout the course of the semester, it was not uncommon for a writer to produce one of the most coherent texts in the class under one writing condition and then produce one of the most incoherent texts under another condition. Christine and Sherri are two writers who particularly demonstrate this phenomenon. Both produce highly coherent texts within certain contexts: Sherri when writing about a topic she herself has selected and Christine when writing about the misuse of power. They also both produce at least one highly incoherent text under other writing contexts. The misuse of power is Sherri's least coherent, relative to the texts produced by the other members of the class. Christine produces her least coherent text when writing about schooling.

Figure 2 sets forth the range in coherence rankings for all the writers across all writing tasks. It further illustrates the lack of generalized control demonstrated by these writers. Column two represents the point difference between the texts ranked most and least coherent for each author. All writers, even the most and least proficient, exhibited at least a 6.5 difference between these two texts, with the class average being 8.58. The same degree of variance is again made evident when each author's text showing the largest variation from his or her overall mean is analyzed (column three). This score was computed by subtracting the text deviating most from the author's class average from this rank. All writers, proficient and nonproficient, produced one text which varied at least five points from their overall mean. The average variation was 7.08.

Just as a writer's control of coherence within one writing condition was not predictive of control within another, overall writer control of coherence

writers	AVERAGE CLASS RANK	RANGE BETWEEN HIGH-LOW RANKINGS	LARGEST RANGE FROM THE MEAN	
Ralph	3-4	6.5	5	
Jerry	8	10	7	
Christine	10	11	9	
Donald	11	7	7	
Ted	3-4	8	6.5	
Nadine	6-7	10	6.5	
Lester	12	8.5	8.5	least proficient
Evelyn	6-7	9	8.5	
Rick	13	7	7	least proficient
Sherri	9	9.5	6.5	
Mary	1	8	7.5	most proficient
Diane	2	9	8	most proficient
Allen	5	8	5	
CLASS AVERAGE	8.5		7.08	

Figure 2. Range in coherence rankings across the five writing tasks.

was not always predictive of control from one task to the next. The "Average Class Rank" column in Figures 1 and 2 indicate each writer's mean standing in control of coherence relative to the other writers in the class. This ranking was generated by averaging each writer's coherence rank from the five texts written and assigning scores, one through thirteen. A score of one represented the most control and the lowest average, and a score of thirteen represented the least control and the highest average. As illustrated in these two figures, even the most proficient writers in the class did not demonstrate consistent proficiency across all writing assignments. Nor did those writers having the least control over coherence always produce highly incoherent texts. There existed conditions under which both groups of writers displayed a high degree as well as a low degree of control over at least one aspect of the process. Control of coherence, at least for this group of writers, is context dependent.

Specifically, Mary and Diane, the two writers in the class with the most control over coherence, both produce texts lacking in relative coherence. For Mary this was the misuse of power text, for Diane it was her text on schooling. They both had a coherence ranking between their most and least coherent texts that was approximately .5 from the class mean. When the variation of each author's individual text from her overall class rank is analyzed, the same degree of difference exists for Mary and Diane as it does for the other writers in the class. The two least proficient writers, Lester and Rick, also were able to generate highly coherent texts under certain conditions. Lester's schooling and Rick's discrimination text are examples of this. The coherence range in their texts represent the same degree of variance as that found for Mary and Diane

By demonstrating the effect of context on writer control of coherence, this study begins to document for writing what Pichert and Anderson (1977)

and Carey, Harste and Smith (1981) have documented for reading comprehension. Pichert and Anderson analyzed the effect which reader perspective had on information recalled from text. They found, and confirmed conventional wisdom in the process, that reader purpose determines what is recalled and the relative importance of individual units of information within a text. As reader perspective changed so did recall and reader ranking of ideas as to their importance within a text. In non-laboratory settings, reader purpose, rather than determined by the researcher, would grow out of context. In essence, the influence of context on comprehension was demonstrated.

Carey, Harste, and Smith add further documentation to the influence of context by replicating a study by Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert, and Goetz (1976). Anderson et al had evaluated the effect which background knowledge had on the perspective taken by individuals when processing ambiguous text. Carey, Harste, and Smith maintained the variable of background in their study, but as a constant, and varied the context in which the texts were read. While background was found to be a critical factor in determining reader perspective, thus confirming the results of the Anderson study, context was also shown to be a salient variable. Again, the influence of context was demonstrated and conventional wisdom confirmed.

This study extends the documentation of the effects of context on reader comprehension into the area of discourse production. It confirms once more what had been intuitively thought. Data now exists illustrating the theoretical notion that the conditions under which texts are produced strongly influence the ability of writers to maintain control over the process. Each context offers a unique set of variables among which writers must negotiate and orchestrate. While the majority of the writers in this study grew in their control of coherence during the course of the semester, this ability could not be generalized across contexts. There existed for all writers optimal situations under which coherence could and could not be maintained, relative to the

other writers in the class.

Given the influence of context, this study does not support the traditional view of literacy development. This view typically holds that individual "skills" exist within the writing process and that these skills can be identified and isolated, practiced and mastered, and then used with the same degree of proficiency from one text to the next. Nor does this study support the notion that growth in proficiency is a process of skill acquisition. As depicted in Figure 3, the writer is usually perceived as accumulating a sequence of writing skills over a period of time until that magical concept we call proficiency is attained. To talk of development in this manner, however, is to ignore the contextual dependency of literacy.

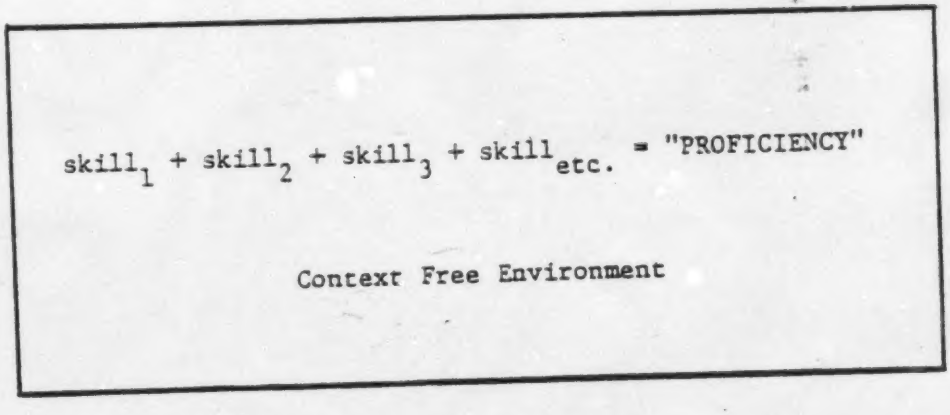

Figure 3. Profile of skill mastery.

Instead, this study suggests that growth in writing is a process of strategy development. As Figure 4 attempts to illustrate, this process involves the ability of the writer to use and control these strategies within an ever widening range of contexts. Strategies, rather than existing and utilized in isolation, only exist as part of a cybernetic system. And, as the context in which this system operates changes, so will the system and so too will the operation of individual strategies within the system.

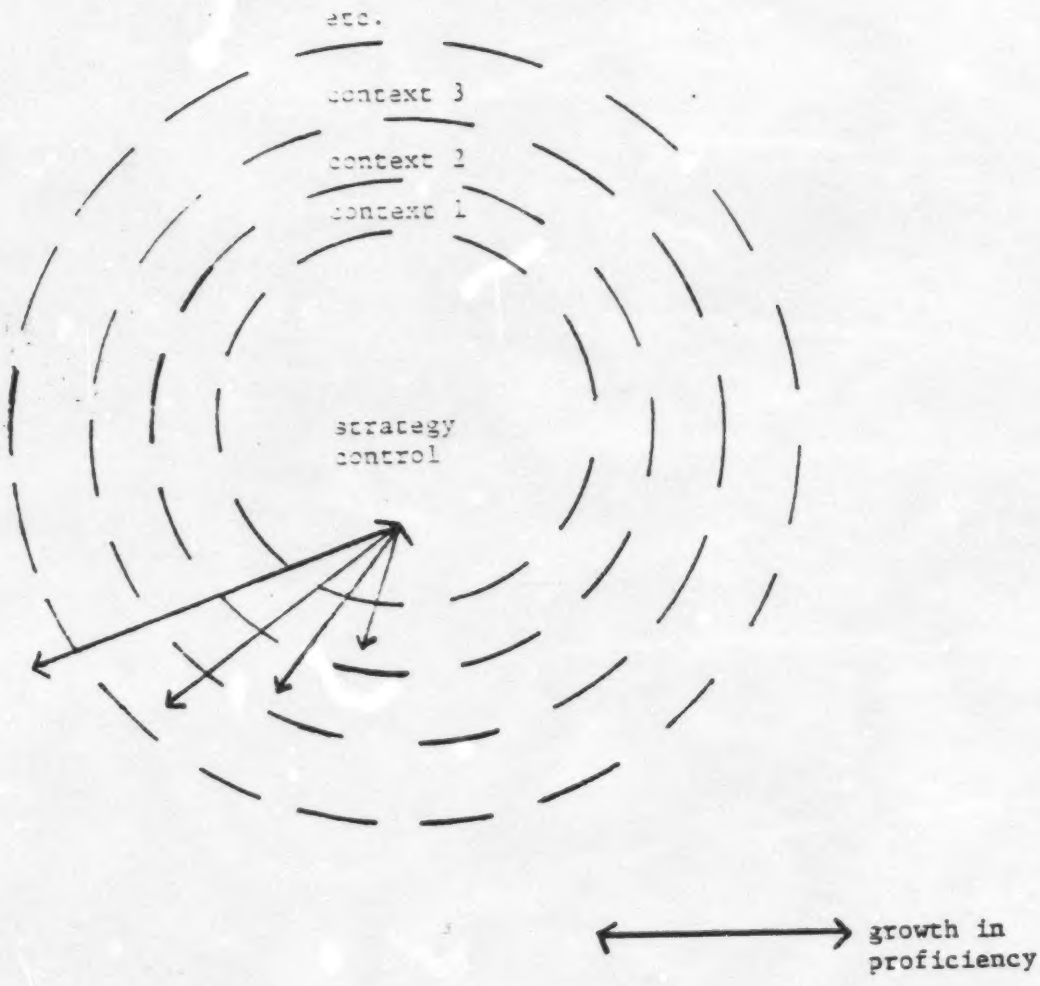

Figure 4. Profile of strategy development.

Implications of Literacy Instruction

The existence of contextual influences on the writing process has profound implications for literacy instruction and requires reconceptualization of what it means to be a proficient language user. Proficiency, it would seem, does not mean the ability to control the language process to an equal degree under all situations. What growth in proficiency may indicate is the ability of the language user to demonstrate increased control more often, within a wider range of contexts, and to a greater degree. Variability in

users, though it would still exist. The writing behavior of the two most proficient writers in this study, Mary and Diane, supports this hypothesis. While on the average they showed more control over the process over a wider range of conditions, the variance in their coherence rankings were equivalent to even the least proficient writer in the class. Given this new definition of proficiency, it would appear that the teaching of writing should require students to express meanings through text under an ever widening range of conditions. It would also require that teachers expect and accept varying degrees of writer control over the process as writing contexts vary.

Summary and Conclusions

In conclusion, it has been the purpose of this paper to theoretically explain, and empirically document, the variability found within the writing process. For too long, we as researchers and teachers have held the view writing is writing, and that one either can or cannot control the process. The data in this study begins to suggest that this may not in fact be the case. As with most human behavior, variability in writing appears to be the one constant upon which we can depend. It appears to be evident even among the most and least proficient of writers and not to be caused by simple one-way interactions involving a single variable. Instead, variability is the result of what Rosenblatt (1978) has termed a transaction.

Writing as transaction depicts the process as one of synthesis. The meanings constructed by any given author, and the psychological, sociological, and linguistic variables which guide such construction, are more than the sum of the parts. These variables are not separate, unique, and exhaustively definable entities, but only can be characterized by the total environment in which they operate. As part of the total situation, each is conditioned by and conditions the other. The writer and the environment each become, in a sense, the environment for the other. A change in any one

element will therefore effect change in all the others.

Given the transactional nature of the process, those involved in the teaching of writing would be well advised not to drill our students on single and isolated aspects of the writing process in isolation from all the others. Instead, key strategies or operations in the process should be highlighted. In this way, we can begin to ensure the contextual dependency of literacy and support our students in developing the necessary flexibility with the process which a literate culture such as our own demands.

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